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House, in secret, reportedly hears covert action criticism

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WASHINGTON - The House, beginning debate on a resolution to cut off covert military aid to Nicaraguan insurgents, went into a rare closed-door session yesterday in which opponents of the Administration's policy cited a recently completed CIA study criticizing the effectiveness of the operation, sources said.

The National Intelligence Estimate, dated June 30, is one of the most detailed, high-level analyses yet within the intelligence community, and the critical tone of the classified document is seriously damaging to the Administration's case, the sources said.

The four-hour closed-door meeting yesterday marked only the third time in more than a century that the House has gone into secret session, and the resolution is an unprecedented challenge to President Ronald Reagan's policy in Central America.

No votes on the resolution are expected until next week, but there appears to be increasing unity in the Democratic leadership behind the resolution to cut off aid, which is sponsored by Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, and Rep. Clement Zablocki (D-Wis.), chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

"When it comes down to it, I will be with Boland-Zablocki," said Majority Leader Jim Wright (D-Texas). After participating in private talks with the Administration over the past month, Wright said there is a "remote" chance that a compromise can be reached before the House vote.

"It is really a question of what we want to be as a country," said Wright in one of his sharpest criticisms yet of the covert aid. "Do we want to be sneaky country or a straightforward country. . . . We ought to tell the truth."

A united party leadership will strengthen Boland's hand on the floor, but the Springfield Democrat is faced with what appears to be

strong Republican opposition and the risk of major defections from conservative Southern delegations such as Florida's. "It looks like a close call, really," said Boland.

While most of yesterday's four-hour meeting was intended as a classified briefing by the Intelligence committee for members, some of the speakers drew applause, reflecting the continued partisanship seen earlier in committee votes.

"The applause was partisan," said a liberal Democrat later. "I guess it was predictable but it's not good."

From the outset of the covert operation - in the first year of the Administration - leading members of the Intelligence Committee have questioned the operation. As the insurgent force has grown, so has the controversy surrounding it. As part of a classified annex to the 1983 Intelligence Authorization Act, Congress attached language last year to prohibit any aid for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinista regime. The same restriction was made law in December as an amendment to an appropriations bill.

Though the Administration has said the operation is within the law, the insurgents have made no secret of their hope to overthrow the government, and Reagan himself has referred to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas based in Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras as "freedom fighters."

"I have no doubt in my mind

that that amendment has been violated," said Boland recently. He has criticized the effectiveness of the operation in meeting its stated goal of interdicting arms shipments from Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

Rep. Bill Young (R-Fla.), a member of the Intelligence Committee, said there is "hard" evidence that these shipments have been lessened. But according to sources, the National Intelligence Estimate report reflected a consensus within intelligence branches like the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency seriously challenging the program's effectiveness.

"It has some very, very strong stuff," said one source. It reportedly provided the framework for a strong attack by Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), a member of the Intelligence and Foreign Affairs committees, who took the lead with Boland in supporting the resolution.

Young represented the opposition on the GOP side with Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Though attendance dwindled after the first two hours, members said that close to two-thirds of the House was present to hear the opening remarks.

Minority Leader Robert Michel (R-Ill.) dismissed reports last week that the CIA is preparing for a force between 12,000 and 15,000, but yesterday an aide acknowledged that the numbers had "credibility."